

***White Noise* and the Supermarket Aesthetic**



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Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) has been thoroughly examined as a work of postmodern fiction, with particular attention to media and simulacra, and from the perspective of science and technology, focusing on chemistry and toxicity. I want here to look at the novel from an art historical perspective, considering the relations it bears to movements in the visual and plastic arts and how such relations might inform a reading of the text.

I will suggest that *White Noise* is a work related in its aesthetic, technique, and themes primarily to Pop art and Photorealism¹ — movements which first developed in the 1960s as a response to the increasingly pervasive consumer culture and the then-dominant school of Abstract Expressionism, which many saw as growing too ephemeral and removed from daily existence. Like Pop and Photorealism, *White Noise* is guided by a suburban aesthetic, elements of which include an appreciation of, and fascination with, suburban housing, highways, cars, townscapes, and, particularly significant to the novel, malls, shops, and supermarkets.



Don Eddy, *Peaches, Tomatoes, Watermelons* (1972)

The Supermarket Aesthetic

Jack Gladney and Murray J. Siskind are colleagues at the College-on-the-Hill, but they run into each other more often at the supermarket than on campus. In a sense, this seems a natural place for a professor in the department of “American Environments.” If there exists a definable supermarket aesthetic, then it too is in some way central in our culture. The supermarket aesthetic, like the larger suburban aesthetic, is one of the everyday. In an interview, DeLillo remarks that this was a motivation for the novel: “I tried to find a kind of radiance in dailiness. Sometimes this radiance can be almost frightening. Other times it can be almost holy or sacred Imagine someone from the third world who has never set foot in a place like that suddenly transported to an A&P in Chagrin Falls, Ohio. Wouldn’t he be elated or frightened? Wouldn’t he sense that something transcending is about to happen to him in the midst of all this brightness?”

In addition to everydayness, DeLillo here also isolates another defining characteristic of the supermarket aesthetic, that of light. Other key features are bright colors, bulk and repetition, and a certain ambiguity that the viewer (or target market) may perceive as psychological manipulation — something almost sinister behind the cheery exterior.



Fred Meyer – Portland, OR

Contemporary literary representations of the supermarket pick up on its ambiguous quality. Randall Jarrell's "A Sad Heart at the Supermarket" laments the form and content of consumer culture. A more celebratory depiction can be found in Leonard Kriegel's "Supermarket Modern."

Although it is not often discussed, that a supermarket aesthetic exists is hardly surprising. Supermarkets, since their inception, have always represented carefully engineered aesthetic environments, and the products they sell have packaging that has been painstakingly designed to appeal to the senses.

Packaging

Around the turn of the twentieth century, packaging went from brown paper and string to a sophisticated marketing tool and became an industry with its own trade journals, conferences, and research strategies, all of which saw an even greater boom from the 1960s.



Iris Products (1960s)

As Glenn Porter notes, “few aspects of human life have been so closely studied as the behaviour of the consumer in the presence of the package” (38). DeLillo, and to some extent Jack, is aware of this secret life of packages: “I pushed my cart along the aisle. Wilder sat inside . . . trying to grab items whose shape and radiance excited his system of sensory analysis” (159). The family’s youngest child, in fact, is consistently associated with packaging, highlighting its design to excite primitive responses. At the beginning of the novel, we see Wilder “surrounded by open cartons, crumpled tinfoil, shiny bags of potato chips, bowls of pasty substances covered with plastic wrap, flip-top rings and twist ties” (7).

Rachel Bowlby notes that “quite apart from considerations within retailing and manufacturing, the conjunction of practical and aesthetic criteria made packaging a natural field for experiment” (84). It is at this intersection that Pop art was born, and its legacy remains controversial. One view of Pop sees it fighting back against the commercialization of art — fighting the supermarket aesthetic on its own ground with its own techniques. Certainly, there is something worth resisting — that “sinister” element lurking behind the bright colors and cheerful packaging, grounded in the technology and psychology of advertising. This accounts for much of the “psychic data” that Murray Siskind picks up on in the supermarket.

And it goes beyond packaging — the “dirty tricks” and manipulation can be seen in the layout of the supermarket as well. The produce section is up front, as fruits and vegetables carry high profit margins, and research shows that customers who have loaded their cart with healthy foods feel less guilty about putting in some junk food later. To maximize the time and money a customer spends there, produce sections are often designed as mazes. Once customers emerge from the produce section, they have a long way to go to find other staples (bread, milk, cheese, meat), which are nearly always placed at the rear of the store, on opposite sides from each other. Within aisles, high-demand products are placed in the center, drawing the customer further in; high priced and impulse items are toward the ends; and cookies and sugary foods are placed on the lower shelves to attract the attention of children, the most effective sales people of all (demonstrated in the novel, again, by Wilder).

But the psychic data go both ways — the careful refinement of supermarket layouts and package design means that the supermarket aesthetic can also tell us something about how humans behave and what they find aesthetically pleasing. From this perspective, there is also something worth celebrating. When asked how he came to paint Campbell's soup cans, Warhol replied that he simply liked them. The Campbell's soup he ate for lunch every day as a child left a strong enough impression to provide inspiration later in life when he was looking for a new direction for his painting. Then there were the Coke bottles, Brillo boxes, Del Monte boxes, and soon there were enough “products” for *American Supermarket*, a 1964 gallery show in New York in which Warhol participated with other artists including Claes Oldenberg.



American Supermarket (1964)

American Supermarket was a total environment installation, complete with signs and muzak, where visitors could buy pictures by Lichtenstein, chrome fruits and wax vegetables by Robert Watts, paraffin steaks and cheeses by Mary Inman, and, of course, soup cans by Andy Warhol (both the paintings and, perhaps more interestingly, *actual* cans of Campbell's soup which the “artist” had signed and sold at an inflated price).

The supermarket aesthetic also played a significant role in the development of Photorealism, which, like Pop, began as a reaction against Abstract Expressionism and from a desire for a more homegrown “American” art. It did this through a return to genre and an everyday subject matter very much in line with the sort of pop academics described in *White Noise* by Professor Lasher: “the things they don’t teach . . . Bowls with no seats. Pissing in sinks. The culture of public toilets. All those great diners, movie houses, gas stations. The whole ethos of the road” (67). Like Lasher, many photorealist artists are motivated by a sense of nostalgia and aim to celebrate their subject matter. Some critics and viewers have sensed a satirical element — something that can be seen in Duane Hanson’s fibreglass sculpture *Supermarket Shopper*.

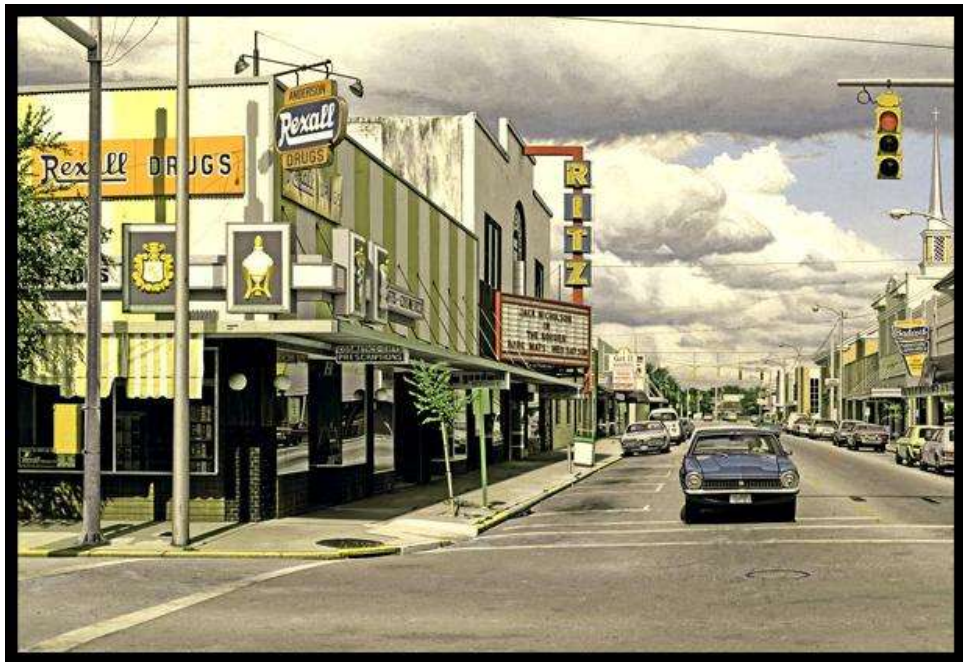


Duane Hanson, *Supermarket Shopper* (1970)

In general, though, supermarkets, movie theatres, pharmacies, and even fast food restaurants are portrayed with an aesthetic appreciation in Photorealism.



Ralph Goings, *Safeway Interior* (1974)



Davis Cone, *The Ritz* (1982)



Marc Trujillo, *6351 Sepulveda Boulevard* (2012)

As to DeLillo's literary representation of the suburban and supermarket aesthetic in *White Noise* — I would place it somewhere between Pop and Photorealism, between critique and celebration. Much of the critique is aimed at Jack and the Gladneys. Jack and Babette take on the “bulk” element in their personal appearance. They are also heavily invested in the idea of packaging, especially Jack and the “professor” costume he cannot be seen on campus without; Heinrich in his paramilitary fashion and Babette in her sweatsuits send different, yet no less clear, messages. The level of comfort and intimacy the family displays in the supermarket is perhaps greater than at home, and they are more susceptible to advertising and television's “brain-sucking power” than they would like to believe (16).

The character of Murray is much more a voice of celebration. DeLillo purposefully exaggerates Murray's theories and analyses, and in his enthusiasm and embellishment, I see Murray as something like the novel's Pop artist. One detail about Murray's shopping habits prompts me to extend the art historical association beyond Pop: his preference for, and fascination with, generic label products. What is interesting for us here is the new trend they introduced into the supermarket aesthetic — what Murray calls “the new austerity” (18). It is Jack who first connects

cereal boxes with the avant-garde, yet his observation is most likely sarcastic. Murray is converted and goes on to develop the idea. He says he buys generic because he likes “the packages themselves . . . Bold new forms. The power to shock” (19). If the brightly colored packages throughout the rest of the supermarket correspond to Pop, then these black and white minimalist packages might suggest early Suprematism, particularly such works as Malevich’s “Black Square.” Like Mondrian, Kandinsky, and others who were developing abstract painting in the early twentieth century, Malevich was influenced by various spiritualist ideas and felt that art should attempt to capture not the external, visible world, but should aspire to be a visual analogue to consciousness and emotion.



Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square* (1914)



Generic beer

Admittedly, the connection is somewhat of a stretch. Yet in addition to the aesthetic analogue, the sort of mysticism behind Suprematism accords well with Murray’s mystico-religious reading of the supermarket as a place which “recharges us spiritually,” a place “sealed off, self-contained . . . timeless” (38). Others have made similar associations. In the essay referred to above, Kriegel writes: “I looked at supermarkets as a true believer views a church or synagogue or mosque — rightly or wrongly, their existence is curiously reassuring” (117). In speaking of the “new” centrality of the supermarket, many commentators give the impression that it has *replaced* religious institutions, but I would point out that since ancient times, markets have stood at the literal and figurative center of cities, in front of, beside, or even inside the church or temple. It is not that the religious institution is replaced, but rather *subtracted* — the market was there all along.

The association of food with the spiritual and the aesthetic is likely very ancient and straightforward. The fact that we find the bright colors of plants, fruits, and vegetables pleasing probably has a lot to do with our stomachs, and the bright colors of the supermarket aesthetic likely bear relation to their natural analogues in fruits and vegetables. Produce sections also rely on the aesthetic properties of abundance and repetition, suggesting a symbolic relation to Eden and other gardens of paradise.



Jan Brueghel the Younger, *Paradise* (c. 1620)



Produce section

The supermarket is the suburban Eden — the modern cornucopia — both of which have been prominent motifs in art for millennia. From this perspective, then, it is no surprise to find it a subject of contemporary art and literature.

Death and Beauty

The association of supermarkets with the spiritual and the sublime is extended in the novel through their association with death. Murray is reminded of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, comparing the space of the supermarket to a state of death — “here we don’t die, we shop. But the difference is less marked than you think” (37-38) (Note also one of DeLillo’s alternate titles for the novel: “The American Book of the Dead”). Other times the connection is indirect, achieved through setting. It is at the supermarket, for example, where Jack hears the rumor of the death of the man in the mylex suit (40) and the news of Cotsaki’s death — news which prompted Murray to come straight to the supermarket (160). Jack is on the way to the supermarket when the exercise by SIMUVAC begins, and he and Murray are leaving there when they have their discussion on murder (278).

On another level, supermarkets are linked with death in the sense that nearly everything we eat once lived and is now dead, now called “groceries” and aesthetically arrayed for our selection. Food and markets have long been subjects for painters, the meat no less than the fruit. The seventeenth-century Flemish painter Frans Snyders devoted much attention to this — what we might call the “market aesthetic,” in which food, death, and beauty commingle.



Frans Snyders, *A Game Stall* (c. 1630)

Snyders also specialized in traditional still life, a genre historically connected to both Pop and Photorealism. The *vanitas* genre of painting linked still life with the tradition of *memento mori* and often links death (usually represented by a skull) to everyday life in the form of common objects.



Pieter Claesz, *Vanitas - Still Life* (1630)

It is interesting to consider that the most common subjects of still life are flowers, food and skulls — subjects central to the theme of death and beauty, and the market/supermarket aesthetic.



Alexandre-François Desportes, *Still Life* (mid 17th c.)

Pop art does the same thing, yet food and packaging are themselves the *memento mori*. They are sometimes themselves the cause of death — a sentiment repeated often in *White Noise*, particularly through the children, as when Denise tells her mother that the artificial sweeteners in her chewing gum cause cancer in laboratory animals (41) or when Heinrich tells his father that “it’s the things right around you in your own house that’ll get you sooner or later” (167). As we have seen, Pop art is both celebratory and critical of mass-produced culture, including food and drink, but even at its most critical, it doesn’t often make a direct link between the supermarket and death. Sometimes, however, it does.



A. Warhol, *Torn Campbell's Soup Can* (1962)



Simon Renard de Saint-André, *Vanitas* (c. 1650)

Soon after Warhol's soup cans became a hit, he began depicting damaged cans with torn labels which suggest the fragility of consumer life much in the way that Renaissance still lifes use bubbles (the *homo bulla* motif). These cans rupture the pristine sheen of the supermarket aesthetic and, in a way, suggest death. The connection is made explicit in Warhol's *Tunafish Disaster*, inspired by a tabloid article about two Detroit women who died from food poisoning.



Andy Warhol, *Tunafish Disaster* (1963)

These works are the beginnings of what is generally called Warhol's "death and disaster" period. In this grouping, Warhol himself came to include his celebrity portraits, which are another prominent link between his work and *White Noise*.



Andy Warhol, *Triple Elvis* (1963)

Given its pop-culture curriculum, it is no surprise that Elvis should be a prominent subject at the College on the Hill; what is more unusual is the "Warholification" of Hitler in the novel. That DeLillo was thinking along these lines is likely, especially considering his use of Warhol's "Mao" series in *Mao II*.



Andy Warhol, *Mao* (1972)

In *White Noise*, Hitler is thoroughly academicized and abstracted from lived human history. Neither Gladney nor the novel make any mention of his horrific acts. On one level, it is a condemnation of academia that ought to make us cringe as much as the lighter satire of academia makes us laugh. Paul Cantor has noted that few critics ever mention Hitler when writing on *White Noise* and those that do, do so to criticize DeLillo for moral laxity.² On another level, “Hitler studies” provides for some humor, admittedly dark (my favorite joke being the title of Jack’s seminar: “Advanced Nazism”).

That few critics want to take on DeLillo’s treatment of Hitler has a lot to do with what Terrence Des Pres called “holocaust etiquette.” It’s a delicate issue, to be sure, but it’s worth asking what DeLillo is up to in juxtaposing Hitler and Elvis.³ Following the novel’s ties to Pop art, I would suggest that he is doing something similar to what Warhol did with Chairman Mao — appropriating an icon in order to disarm or enervate the mythic figure behind it. Humor, as Des Pres notes, can be a legitimate and useful strategy: “in the realm of art, a comic response is more resilient, more effective in revolt against terror and the sources of terror than a response that is solemn or tragic . . . comic art resists that which has come to pass” (281).⁴

White Noise also shares with Warhol's work an aesthetic of death in a literal sense. When fleeing from the Airborne Toxic Event, the Gladneys come upon a car accident, in which "the scene of injured people, medics, smoking steel, all washed in a strong and eerie light, took on the eloquence of a formal composition" (119). Jack also has an aesthetic response to the bright-red, bloody scene he creates by shooting Mink.⁵ Among the best known works of Warhol's "death and disaster" series are the electric chair prints, but many present death in a more direct manner. Some do so through the lens of tabloids, as in "Tunafish Disaster," standing as commentaries on the human trait of morbid curiosity:



Andy Warhol, *129 Die in Jet* (1962)



Andy Warhol, *Ambulance Disaster* (1963)

Others present death in a more documentary fashion, as in *Ambulance Disaster*. Both approaches can be seen in *White Noise*. The opening of the final chapter in the "Waves and Radiation" section is a sort of literary version of Warhol's death series, sharing three of its most common themes — riots, suicide, and car crashes:

A man in Glasboro died when the rear wheel of his car separated from the axle. An idiosyncrasy of that particular model. The lieutenant governor of the state died of undisclosed natural causes, after a long illness. We all know what that means. A Mechanicsville man died outside Tokyo during a siege of the airport by ten thousand helmeted students. (98)

Conclusion

Murray's readings of cinematic car crashes are even more outlandish than his pronouncements on the supermarket: "It's a celebration. A reaffirmation of traditional values and beliefs. I connect car crashes to holidays like Thanksgiving and the Fourth" (208). How seriously are we meant to take the novel's examinations of the various themes discussed here, and what ties them together in a late twentieth-century context? Philip Ball's summary of the subject matter of *White Noise* goes far by way of explanation — it's about, he says, "the mythology that underlies suburban American life: the way that feelings of disempowerment and helplessness engendered by a dependence on commodities and services provided by faceless corporations and invisible forces create their own superstitions, belief systems, and legends" (107). And, I would add, their own *aesthetics*.

I have suggested that the supermarket aesthetic may be much older than the supermarket itself — perhaps even ancient; the association of death with beauty is ancient as well. What is new, as Jack points out, is that now there are many more ways to die, from car crashes (or being run over by cars, as Wilder nearly is) to "death made in the laboratory" (124). This is a paradox of technology, as Jack explains: "the greater the scientific advance, the more primitive the fear" (154). Elsewhere, however, he notes that "the genius of the primitive mind is that it can render human helplessness in beautiful ways" (135). Malevich wrote that "life and its manifestations have hitherto been considered from two different standpoints — the material and the religious. It would seem that a consideration of life from the standpoint of art ought to become a third and equally valid point of view" (120). *White Noise* asks some significant and troubling questions of contemporary society, and of art as well. But it is a novel after all, a work of art, and thus its own answer — poised aesthetically, like so many works of Pop art and Photorealism, between critique and celebration.

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Notes

¹ Both movements were/are known by several alternate names – Pop was once known as "Neo Dada" as well as "Realism," and Photorealism is still variously labelled as Superrealism, Hyperrealism, etc. I use "Photorealism" here mainly to avoid confusion with Baudrillard, whose concepts of hyperreality and simulacra have been the dominant theoretical focus in criticism on *White Noise*; I am not, however, denying the connection, as such ideas are central to these artistic movements as well.

² A notable exception that appeared after Cantor's essay is Paul Young's "No One Sees the Camps: Hitler and Humor in *White Noise*." *Approaches to Teaching DeLillo's White Noise*. Ed. Tim Engles and John N. Duvall. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2006. 39-49.

³ And it is DeLillo's comparison; Jack resists the comparison, noting his generosity at "allowing [his] subject to be associated with an infinitely lesser figure, a fellow who sat in La-Z-Boy chairs and shot out TVs" (73).

⁴ In any case, the "Hitler" icon has by now lost its legitimate potency in political discourse, when mainstream political figures, including Barack Obama, are routinely compared to, and portrayed as, Hitler, and government-subsidized health care is referred to as a "Nazi" policy by some on the right.

⁵ "I watched blood squirt from the victim's midsection. A delicate arc. I marveled at the rich color, sensed the color-causing action of nonnucleated cells. The flow diminished to a trickle, spread across the tile floor. I saw beyond words. I knew what red was, saw it in terms of dominant wavelength, luminance, purity. Mink's pain was beautiful, intense" (*White Noise* 296-97).

Cover image: "Cherubs on Aisle 7," Brian Wallace